

Side Brown

Even before anybody had heard Bruce Springsteen's two new albums *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town* (Columbia), people were bitching about what nerve he had to release two records instead of one and asking why he didn't just make it a double album for a cheaper price. Americans have this thing about owning their artists, and besides nobody is making anyone buy one or both. The albums are two separate collections of songs, and while one may lead into the other in terms of the emotions expressed, that's how Springsteen wants them viewed which is his right as an artist.

These are Springsteen's first albums in five years, and during that period he divorced, remarried, fathered two children, moved to California and dissolved his band. The albums are about coming to terms with all of that. They are also about coming to terms with being a very rich man. At 42, Springsteen is no longer the Jersey kid of romantic boardwalk nights and songs of escape. He hasn't been for quite a while, nor does he want to be. He made it beyond his wildest dreams, hit the top, and no one can say he didn't work at it or for it. He did it without compromising his integrity, and while trying to hold on to his values, at the same time discovering what those values meant. No small feat in the media glare of show-biz and the insatiable hunger of demanding fans. So after *Tunnel of Love*, and a couple of years of massive touring, it was clearly time to retreat, regroup and find the next level. That next level is something rockers have been coping with for quite a while now. How to you take this teenage rebellion music and make it satisfying and keep it fun as you get older?

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These two albums make clear that Springsteen has no desire to top himself (Michael Jackson's major failing) -- only to keep going. Despite using different musicians, with keyboardist Roy Bittan the only E Street band holdover, there's no great change in his sound, and his melodies often echo past work. The change is in the emotional landscape of the songs. There's no more desperate characters trying to make a fast break on the open road from dead-end jobs and dead end towns. The fast break has been made. *Human Touch*, written and recorded first deals with that break, and how to make it work. The specter of Springsteen's first marriage hangs like a shadow in the background with the best songs searching and questioning. The search and questions are of the inner soul, of belief in one's self and faith.

Lucky Town doesn't necessarily answer these questions or end the search, but it accepts them. "I had some victory that was just a failure in deceit/Now the jokes comin' up through the soles of my feet," he sings in the title track. In "Local Hero," he returns to his home town to find his face staring out from a velvet painting in the window of the five and dime.

The killer track, the one that got me immediately is "If I Should Fall Behind," a simply beautiful ballad that works because it's so simple. Set at a wedding, it crystallizes hopes and fears: "Now everyone dreams of a love lasting and true/But you and I know what this world can do."

Both albums share clinkers and throwaways. "57 Channels," a typical Springsteen jokey rocker and the too long "Big Muddy" despite it's spare arrangement on "Lucky Town"

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don't hold up too well, and I can't hear "Leap of Faith" without thinking of Lou Reed's far superior "Busload of Faith."

Lucky Town has more of a stripped down feel and is more accessible though both albums share Springsteen's affinity for a big sound and Human Touch tends to rock a little harder. Maybe Springsteen could have edited and put out one super album instead of two very good ones, except that both albums get better with each listen. He may not be breaking new musical ground, but he's not slipping either.

Friday B.B. King returns to Valley Forge Music Fair with special guests Ruth Brown and Bobby "Blue" Bland. The past year has seen King's record company MCA reissue a number of his older albums on CD, but one of the best reissues is on Flair/Virgin-- The Best of... Volume One which is 20 of King's earliest tracks for Kent/Modern. Unfortunately, no information is provided as to where, when or with whom this stuff was recorded. The album features several songs which are now King standards such as "Every Day (I Have the Blues)," "Sweet Little Angel," and "Sweet 16," plus rare versions of "Dust My Broom" and "Mean Ole Frisco." All the ingredients of King's style are much in evidence, but this is King at his rawest and funkiest.

By contrast, King's latest There Is Always One More Time (MCA) is quite slick. It's recorded with a small (for B.B.) band of L.A. studio funk and rock musicians and is notable for its lack of horns and use of synthesized strings. Still and despite it's obvious that his guitar leads are over-dubbed, King hasn't changed all that much. His singing on such
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tracks as the knockout, "The Blues Come Over Me" and "Mean and Evil" is as forceful as ever and his guitar on "Back In L.A." still cuts through you. Compared to the Modern recordings, the sound is oh so clean, but it works. King (in the liner notes) says its best album. That ain't exactly the case since he still has to top the king of King albums, Live at the Regal, but for someone who's close to 50 years of performing, the man's still got it. Expect the same Friday night.

Saturday Little Village play the Tower, which is something a lot of people have been waiting for ever since Ry Cooder, Jim Keltner and Nick Lowe got together to back John Hiatt on Bring the Family five years ago. The sound of Little Village is harder with more of a group feel than the sound on that album. Rhythm and Blues is the thread that ties it together. Their songs cover it all from doo-wop to funk with side trips for Caribbean and Zydeco explorations and have an offhand sense of humor which comes through in the lyrics of "Don't Bug Me When I'm Workin'" and "Solar Sex Panel." But there's also several songs which hold their own and stand as simply great tunes such as "Fool Who Knows," "Don't Think About Her When You're Tryin' to Drive" and "Big Love."

While their two TV appearances (Farm Aid and the Tonight Show) weren't particularly impressive, I've seen Ry Cooder at least a dozen times and John Hiatt almost as much and have never seen them give a bad show. More to the point, I've never seen Cooder (making his first appearance here in at least a decade) be less than amazing.

After Little Village, you might want to make it down to Dobbs and catch Peter's
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Cathedral, an interesting new band that's been garnering quite a buzz on the local scene. At first glance, their ethereal sound is somewhat reminiscent of the Dead with sort of jazz drumming and bass lines rooted in funk but a closer listen reveals thought out arrangements and skilled songwriting instincts by singer/guitarist Peter Richan on songs such as "Man in the Raincoat," "My Water" and "It Takes a Lot." Richan sings with force matched by the excellent rhythm section of standout bassist D. Scott Woodman and drummer Dave Justh, while guitarist David Kradjel is best when he's not imitating Garcia providing the songs with mood and color.